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EXAMINING EARLY AND RECENT CRITICISM OF *THE WASTE LAND*:
A REASSESSMENT

by

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A THESIS

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EXAMINING EARLY AND RECENT CRITICISM OF *THE WASTE LAND*:
A REASSESSMENT

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University of Nebraska, 2010

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My thesis will closely examine recent trends in criticism of *The Waste Land*, namely the ideological rebuttal against the New Critics proposed by recent historicists such as Lawrence Rainey. I will show that Rainey has unfairly characterized the so-called New Critics as supporting a reading of the poem that only sees it for a work of order and unity while in fact they acknowledged many organizational inconsistencies within the text. A central tenet of my thesis will be that ideological characterizations of earlier critics should never substitute actual close readings of the texts themselves. My findings will lead to broader conclusions about the nature of literary criticism and how ideas are proliferated, forgotten, or ignored within academia.

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Examining Early and Recent Criticism of *The Waste Land*:

A Reassessment

There once was a time when T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* was heralded as the masterwork of the twentieth century's arguably greatest poet. The poem's legacy was established by criticism that delighted in its difficult structure, dense allusiveness, and multiplicity of meanings. The poem seemed endlessly resilient to any attempt to fix a clear meaning upon it, biographical, historical, or otherwise. Because of the proliferation of actively competing conceptions, the criticism surrounding the work took on a life of its own. Scholars clamored to give their opinion of the various meanings it contained. Perhaps the strongest voices in this critical landscape were the so-called New Critics who found the poem a perfect vehicle for their "text only" ethos of close reading. Through careful consideration of *The Waste Land*'s symbols, themes, and formal features, the New Critics hoped to decipher the complex poem for new audiences.¹ As opposed to abandoning the teaching of poetry to readers perhaps inadequately prepared for literary analysis, the New Critics hoped to give college and university professors a utile methodology to help initiate their novice audiences into the joys of reading poetry.

¹ The furor surrounding the poem coincided with a remarkable change within the academy. Following both the First and Second World Wars, American colleges and universities saw major influxes of students. The demand for teachers of literature skyrocketed, and institutions struggled to provide meaningful introductions to the most respected poets. The expansion of the university system also resulted in a change of what we think of as a "scholar." Literary criticism became the work of professional scholars who soon outnumbered the "man of letters," the latter typified by figures such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Matthew Arnold. The boom in college and university students created opportunities for new careers based solely on the act of literary discussion, either in print or in the classroom. For more on this topic, see Part II entitled, "The Formation of the New Criticism" in *The Cultural Politics of the New Criticism* by Mark Jancovich.

These changes within the academy would no doubt have massive effects on the American reader. Poets' new audience could now be a professionalized class of literary professionals whose work would include transmitting difficult texts to their students. The project of modernism worked symbiotically with these changes. Instead of creating works offering seemingly immediate emotional satisfactions, what Wordsworth spoke of in capturing "the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" (596), modernist poets created works deliberately aimed at alienating their readers. Sympathy was supplanted by complexity; cohesiveness was supplanted by abstraction and fracturing. *The Waste Land* almost perfectly represents the pinnacle of this new breed of poem. The critics of the New Criticism generation treated the poem with enthusiasm, promoting Eliot's intellectually demanding verse, and using the poem as an example of modern literature's capabilities. For *The Waste Land*'s readers, the ways in which they enjoyed poetry changed dramatically. Because poems such as *The Waste Land* operated in an abstruse idiom much different than these readers' own, it was necessary to seek the assistance of professional scholarship to help unpack the text's complexities. The enjoyment of a poem such as *The Waste Land* had less to do, it seemed, with an emotionally instinctive response, and more to do with highly mediated, repeatable and thus teachable, acts of analysis.

This way of reading poetry would dominate the twentieth century's middle decades, but it would not last forever. As the standard story goes, by the 1970s and 80s, a new wave of scholars, wary of the limitations of the "text only" method of reading literature, began to turn to the biographical and historical contexts which the New Critics seemingly outlawed. In doing so, these scholars hoped to achieve a better understanding

of the culture that produced a work of literature. This shift in academic trends coincided with two major posthumous additions, by Eliot's widow Valerie, to his writing that would dramatically change the course of *The Waste Land* scholarship. The first publication, in 1971, was a facsimile edition of Eliot's typescripts and manuscripts² used in the editing process of *The Waste Land*. The second, appearing in 1988, was a large collection of letters to various correspondents, including letters written while Eliot was trying to sell *The Waste Land* to various publishers.³ The letters showed that Eliot's personal and professional life were in a much more severe state of disarray than originally thought.⁴ A new figuration of Eliot's psychology, paired with the materials of the facsimile led many subsequent scholars to believe the construction of *The Waste Land* was more troubled and chaotic than the New Critics might have led their readers to believe.

Alongside these new biographically informed readings of the poem, there also emerged a concern with the precise publication history of *The Waste Land*. Scholars had difficulty deciphering which section of the poem Eliot wrote first and in what chronological order the subsequent sections' construction took place. The scholar who emerged with the authoritative timeline for the poem's creation was Lawrence Rainey.

² Published as: *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra*.

³ Published as: *The Letters of T. S. Eliot: 1898-1922*

⁴ It was already known that Eliot took leave of work, having suffered what was called a "nervous breakdown," but the exact reasons behind the breakdown were revealed as troubles with his marriage, his career, and, perhaps most importantly, a crisis of spirituality. Soon after Eliot convalesced, he would declare to the world that he had decided to convert to the Anglo-Catholic church, but while writing *The Waste Land*, Eliot, having studied Eastern religion, and being influenced by philosophies promoting relativism, found himself in a sort of spiritual purgatory, questioning the very cornerstones of his religious upbringing.

Rainey's work included comparing Eliot's letters with the various papers and typescripts to determine Eliot's whereabouts, and therefore dates, when he worked on the poem. This research would prove indispensable because after Rainey's findings, one could definitively compare what Eliot was writing in *The Waste Land* to his contemporaneous critical writings and letters. Furthermore, the dispersed timeline of creation complicated any claims to the poem's linear architecture. For these reasons, Rainey will be a central figure in my own analysis of the critical history of *The Waste Land*.

Rainey's investigations go far beyond delineating this timeline, however. He also set out to rebuke all of the interpretive scholarship of the New Critics. He charged his literary predecessors with ignorance for only looking at the text, and blindly promoting a work whose whole story was not known. To Rainey, the interventions of the New Critics had too great an influence on new readers because these earlier critics did not have access to the information Rainey helped uncover, he argued that they brashly overstated their claims for *The Waste Land*, looking to find unity, pattern, and deliberation in a poem where there was, in fact, little of these to be had.

In acknowledging Rainey's influence on recent criticism, it might be easy to determine this most recent trend of criticism to be a point of arrival, to think that all of prior literary criticism has led progressively to our current moment. I will argue that it is irresponsible to do so. When a careful reading of the critics grouped under the "New Critics" is performed, one may be surprised at their caution in approaching *The Waste Land*. The dogmatism of which they are accused is not the whole truth, and even the idea of a coherent program of "New Criticism" appears as much a projection—if not caricature, based on current critical attitudes—as an accurate reflection of that earlier

work. In this essay, I will attempt a close examination of a few key critics of *The Waste Land*. Like Lawrence Rainey, I will not focus on the text of the poem to offer a new interpretation, but will favor instead the examination of secondary materials. Like the New Critics, I will use a method of close, attentive reading to grasp a firm understanding of the inner-workings of these various critics' analyses.

Through an honest, depoliticized reading of their works, I will argue that we should remain cautious before determining critical shifts to be truly "seismic" or "rupturing." I will begin with Lawrence Rainey's investigations into *The Waste Land*, examining carefully his historicist approach to the poem and his reactions to the New Critics. After determining Rainey's characterization of the New Critics, I will closely read the works he targets, noting any inconsistencies between his portrayals of the earlier works and what they actually entail. Finally, it will be important to determine if this argument between New Critics and historicists can somehow be reconciled for the twenty-first century reader. In my conclusion, I will briefly comment on the applicability of this analysis of *The Waste Land*'s criticism to larger debates around the role of criticism, arguing that the reputation of a critical text, no matter how commonly held, should never replace an actual reading of it. I will also discuss the inherent dangers in critical debates that commit to a dichotomous structure, only considering their own critical perspective and the supposed opposite, when in fact a critical history of a poem such as *The Waste Land* is much more diverse than such simple oppositions.

Lawrence Rainey and the Death of a Text

Lawrence Rainey's first published analysis of *The Waste Land* appeared in his 1998 book *Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture*. The chapter

addressing the poem, entitled “The Price of Modernism,” discusses the marketing activities—namely by Ezra Pound and Eliot—that preceded the poem’s publication. Eliot and Pound’s letters, sent to prospective publishers, provide the evidence for Rainey’s essay in which he hopes to dispel the illusion that “‘art’ or ‘the poem’ or ‘the text’ had been the central concern” in Eliot’s creative process (105). His essay chronicles the various agents responsible for publishing what they thought to be a work of genius comparable to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Just as the text was irrelevant to the publishers then, Rainey says the text should be irrelevant to modern readers. His essay truly is an assault on the text, as Rainey takes issue with the fact that “[g]enerations of students have been exhorted to look closely at the poem, to examine only the text, to indulge in a scholastic scrutiny of linguistic minutiae” (106). Rainey’s privileging of a historicist hermeneutic is never so obvious than when he proclaims, “The best reading of a work may, on some occasions, be one that does not read the work at all” (106). Rainey’s thinking here approaches glib paradox, and the statement is deliberately provocative. A more grounded approach to the poem might be one that places the text in its discursive and material contexts while refusing to be lost in the internal details of the poem.

Though Rainey’s essay forces his readers to perceive modernism in a new light that challenges the notion of high modernist works of art as autonomous individual expressions, it does not succeed, as he seems to hope it might, in making the case for the complete lack of individuality or expressiveness in those artworks. *The Waste Land* remains Eliot’s creation, and the pre-publication marketing, it should be remembered, happened behind closed doors and could not have influenced early critics and reviewers as much as Rainey implies. Eliot’s marketing efforts may have opened some doors for

Eliot's poem that would have otherwise remained shut, but Eliot's and Pound's interventions in the publishing industry seemed to have more to do with Eliot's precarious financial situation than nurturing an aura of intrigue around the poem. After all, Eliot turned down publication in *The Dial*, perhaps the most prestigious magazine outlet available to him, because the £34 compensation did not, in Eliot's eyes, justify "a poem which has taken me a year to write and is my biggest work" (qtd. in Rainey *IoM* 84).

A thread that runs through Rainey's criticism of *The Waste Land*, first seen in "The Price of Modernism," is Rainey's resentment for the New Critics. Already in this work, Rainey refuses to look at anything other than the context of *The Waste Land*, while denigrating any sort of close textual reading of the poem. His investigation does not individually treat any New Critic readers of Eliot, but his methodology is certainly antipathetic to those interpretive assumptions that informed Eliot's early critics. His direct interventions with New Criticism would come later.

Rainey's next investigation of *The Waste Land* picks up where "The Price of Modernism" left off. In *Revisiting The Waste Land* (2005), perhaps his best regarded book about the poem, Rainey continues his advocacy for a strongly historicist approach, one that minimizes an analysis of the text of the poem and focuses instead on the climate of its production and reception. The central idea of *Revisiting The Waste Land* is "that the poem's composition had been more troubled than one might have supposed...that its evolution had been more tentative and confused than critical accounts of the poem might have led one to surmise" (ix-x). Given this, Rainey aspires "to read [Eliot's] poem in a key that differs sharply from most accounts of the last eight decades" (ix-x). That is, he

does not want to offer another close reading, but to challenge the assumptions that underlie approaches based upon the practice.

In the preface to this book, Rainey takes the critique of close reading so far as to fancy himself a sort of literary detective who will open unsuspecting and naïve close readers' eyes to the shocking history of the text in front of them. He discusses the analysis he and his readers will undertake in the book's preface. Having "discovered" the "corpus of manuscripts and typescripts that make up the prepublication materials of *The Waste Land*" (xii), Rainey describes the project of this book as follows:

We might think of ourselves, then, as beginning at that familiar starting point of a classical mystery or detective fiction, the discovery of the corpse. Like many of those classical detectives, we shall first have to take note of a great many details, and no doubt we shall have to do a bit of tedious measuring, recording the precise size and weight of objects that must have played some role in the events that resulted in our corpse.

(xii-xiii)

This playful analogy is not marked by the same formality that characterizes Rainey's rhetoric elsewhere, but the extended metaphor of the "corpse" reaffirms, nonetheless, what Rainey thinks of *The Waste Land*'s text. Rainey's hope is to invigorate scholarship of *The Waste Land* by carefully examining the evidence that surrounds the poem. Instead of dusting for fingerprints, he examines letters; instead of finding a telltale strand of hair, he examines the various typescripts and watermarks of the papers upon which Eliot drafted his poem. All these literary forensics are performed to unveil the truth behind *The*

Waste Land's construction, a task that is undoubtedly best assigned to an astute investigative mind.

Now, it is unmistakable that the work Rainey has done is impressive. His "Synoptic Bibliographical Descriptions" section, which provides an exact chronological listing of Eliot's letters, prose, manuscripts, and typescripts, is comprehensive. His knowledge of major and minor reviewers of the poem is immense, and the backbone of his project is undoubtedly the uncovering of all of Eliot's productive activities, especially any acts of publication that were surreptitious. For example, his investigation reveals that certain parts of *The Waste Land*'s manuscripts were written as early as 1913 when Eliot was finishing his studies at Harvard. Findings such as this truly confound notions of the poem's unity by illustrating the randomness with which it was created. Though his is an intriguing perspective on literary inquiry, Rainey does not continue the detective metaphor through his research. Even if we grant him the questionable insight that interpretation is like a murder investigation, that does not mean that skilled fieldwork by detectives (contextual analysis) cannot be crucially supplemented by a thorough autopsy (close reading).

Unlike his previous essay on *The Waste Land* that only showed an undercurrent of hostility to the supposedly revivifying efforts of the New Criticism, in *Revisiting The Waste Land*, Rainey critiques by name prominent New Critic readers of the poem. Rainey does so by first selecting various early reviews of the poem, from an era pre-dating the rise of New Criticism. These reviews show "a tension between the text of *The Waste*

Land and the claims to coherence implied by the notes' reference to 'the plan'"⁵ (117).

On the other hand, the New Critics's chief sin, Rainey argues, is to re-install the notes as central for interpretation of the poem, as in fact some kind of key to understanding. As Rainey would have it, the notes should be dismissed entirely. He cites as evidence for the notes' retraction a speech Eliot delivered to a University of Minnesota audience in 1956.

In the speech, Eliot admits that he

sometimes thought of getting rid of these notes; but now they can never be unstuck. They have had almost greater popularity than the poem itself...My notes stimulated the wrong kind of interest among the seekers of sources. It was just, no doubt, that I should pay my tribute to the work of Miss Jessie Weston; but I regret having sent so many enquirers off on a wild goose chase after Tarot cards and the Holy Grail. (11)

It should be noted that the case for dismissing the notes from conversations of the poem predates Rainey's book. Critic Hugh Kenner is perhaps the most well known figure in suggesting the notes' extraneousness. In his 1959 book, *The Invisible Poet*, Kenner suggests "The notes got added to *The Waste Land* as a consequence of the technological fact that books are printed in multiples of thirty-two pages" (10). Kenner is an early critic who is willing to look to extra-textual evidence to support his understanding of the poem, but the importance of such "explanatory" statements by Eliot should be tempered. Eliot was always one known to stir up controversy about his works, and he certainly does so

⁵ "The Plan" refers to Eliot's (in)famous note added to the book-length publication of *The Waste Land*: "Not only the title, but the plan and a good deal of the incidental symbolism of the poem were suggested by Miss Jessie L. Weston's book on the Grail legend: *From Ritual to Romance* (Macmillan). Indeed, so deeply am I indebted, Miss Weston's book will elucidate the difficulties of the poem much better than my notes can do; and I recommend it (apart from the great interest of the book itself) to any who think such elucidation of the poem worth the trouble" (*Facsimile* 147).

here. Kenner and Rainey feed into this controversy by taking a statement of an aged Eliot and applying it to the poet at a younger age, assuming the poet's thoughts to be static across his entire life, and therefore able to be read in retrospect.

For Rainey, the critic perhaps most "guilty" of setting off on Eliot's "wild goose chase" is Cleanth Brooks. Brooks' 1939 essay, "*The Waste Land*: Critique of the Myth," remains one of the most comprehensive analyses of the poem's symbols and allusions to date, especially those originating from Weston's book. The notes' legitimacy is the point at which Rainey sees Brooks breaking from the early reviewers of the poem and dramatically changing the critical reception of *The Waste Land* for the next several decades. Brooks becomes Rainey's exemplar of the New Critics. Rainey claims that interpretations produced in the years following "Critique of the Myth" were characterized by a belief in the clarity of the poem's text and in the unity of its construction. All of these similar critiques appearing in the years to come were supposedly of Brooks' pedigree.

Before specifically approaching Brooks' essay, Rainey's goal is to first deem any close reading methodology as an illegitimate practice. He does this, as shown above, by refuting the validity of the notes, and by moving concerns such as the publication practices surrounding the poem to the forefront. Once Rainey eliminates Brooks' close readings from his consideration, he takes on an ideological evaluation of Brooks that troublingly approaches an *ad hominem* attack. Rainey begins his analysis of Brooks' intervention into *The Waste Land* with a somewhat simplistic and tendentious description of the New Critic as "a devout Christian from the conservative South" (117). Rainey's labeling of Brooks as a Southern Christian unflatteringly frames "Critique of the Myth"

for Rainey's presumably secular, twentieth-century readers. Such characterizations inform Rainey's understanding of Brooks throughout the essay. To Rainey, Brooks' Southern background left him suffering in "a haze of ahistorical nostalgia, [in] the last outpost of a preindustrial order, one rooted in the land and agriculture" (118). This statement reduces Brooks to a sort of caricature of the American Southerner, one perhaps having more in common with a casual literary dilettante than a serious academic. Since Rainey's focus is not on the close readings, which comprise a great majority of Brooks' essay, he is able to reduce the critique to "[Brooks'] disdain for industry, science, popular culture, and every other index of modernity...summarized in a single word: secularization" (118). We will return to whether or not this is a fair assessment of Brooks' work, but it will also be necessary to examine whether this focus on secularization is a fair assessment of *The Waste Land*, a consideration Rainey does not offer.

Rainey's more successful critique of Brooks comes in a much more subtle way. Near the end of the essay, Rainey turns away from Brooks' religious and regional investments and toward his apparent neoclassicism. He identifies—and even sympathizes with, but in the end rejects—Brooks' all-too-human need to construct a narrative, or, to see the text of *The Waste Land* as exhibiting progression. He traces this understandable desire back to Aristotle and his *Poetics* written over two millennia ago. Aristotle differentiates the epic plot from the dramatic plot by noting the former's greater scope for the irrational. Indeed, certain plots from epic would look almost like parody upon the stage. Specifically, Aristotle mentions the chase of Hector by Achilles before the walls of Troy. It seems as though the entire plot of *The Iliad* builds up to a clash between these

two figures of antiquity, but instead of a fight, the story stalls when Hector flees the duel. The narrative is suspended during the chase until Athena tricks Hector into stopping, and Achilles quickly slays him with little fanfare. Aristotle objects to this scene of the epic because “Events which are impossible but plausible should be preferred to those which are possible but implausible” (qtd. in Rainey 123). It is the unreasonable, possible but implausible, narratives that readers find so maddening.

In the Aristotelian view, the human mind struggles with irrationality. Rainey maintains that *The Waste Land*—if it would have “a plot” at all—would show such irrationality at the heart of its progression. According to Rainey, Brooks falls victim to trying to make *The Waste Land* impossible but plausible, in the hope of elevating the poem to Aristotelian marvel, that precarious position between opacity and clarity, chaos and order that fascinates, as opposed to frustrates. Rainey sees this as a futile effort because to him, *The Waste Land* does not exist in that borderland. Brooks, however, when “confronted with inexplicable patterns and mazes of contradiction...seek[s] a hidden shapeliness that will enable him to accommodate them” (124). It is in exposing Brooks’ neoclassicism; his desire to find unity in this sense, that Rainey most successfully disrupts Brooks’ claims.

If Rainey presents an alternative to Brooks’ neoclassical tendencies, it is in favoring a critical practice in the romantic tradition. Rainey glorifies the early reviewers who approached the poem with naïveté, recognizing the poem’s inherent difficulty and disorienting structure. In his concluding paragraph, Rainey begrudgingly admits, “We cannot, of course, return to an imaginary state of pristine innocence in which the critical history of the last eighty years has been miraculously effaced” (127). Undoubtedly,

Rainey would like nothing more than to do away with all of the New Critical interventions, do away with Eliot's notes, and let the poem exist as a lyric of ferocity, passion, and surprise. "Doing so," he writes,

we can remain open to the pleasure of amazement and the sense of wonder that a reading of *The Waste Land* inevitably brings, attentive to the poem's vertiginous twists and turns of language, responsive to its richly varied ironic and climactic moments, receptive to its lacerating wildness and stubborn refusal to accommodate expectations. (128)

Though this statement makes an attempt at redeeming the poem for his readers, the sentiment does not seem to agree with anything Rainey has written thus far.

Rainey's turn toward an unsystematic, romantic reading of the text is nothing more than the critic taking up the diametrically opposite approach of the New Critical readers. Whereas the New Critics practice systematized analytics, Rainey promotes a *tabula rasa* approach to reading. To experience a reading as Rainey suggests, one must completely ignore New Critical interventions. Rainey thus shows that he will go to great lengths to erase his predecessors' influence. In forwarding a romanticized reading of the poem, Rainey commits to the same idealism of which he accuses Brooks. Instead of reading *The Waste Land* in neoclassical terms, Rainey fully commits to a romantic reading that sways on the cusp between innocence and ignorance. The larger problem with Rainey's proclamation is that he offers no such reading anywhere in this book, thereby leaving his readers with a rather empty sentiment.

Though Rainey would like to return to a state of innocence, early critics' readings of *The Waste Land* can be seen as representing a period of innocence themselves.

Brooks wrote before modern critics knew about Eliot's possible anti-Semitism, his strong desire for profit, and his troubled writing process. In a sense, it was a time when Eliot's texts could be engaged without questioning the man behind the typewriter. It is important, however, to define the difference between naivety and ignorance. Just because the posthumous materials were unavailable to earlier critics does not mean that they were necessarily incapable of comprehending inconsistencies in the poem. If one is to carefully read these essays that supposedly promote the perception of clarity and unity, it may not be so simple to assign them the over-certainty, if not arrogance, with which they have been accused. In truth, early critics such as F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks were more tentative and cautious in their analyses than Rainey would certainly like to think, or has presented to his readers. A thorough reassessment of their essays will provide a deeper understanding of the nature of modernist criticism from its early years to present day.

Revisiting F. R. Leavis and Cleanth Brooks

F. R. Leavis is one of the first scholars to go beyond a "review" of *The Waste Land* and attempt an advanced critical intervention with the poem. Many credit Leavis for helping elevate Eliot's literary career, especially in Britain, where Eliot would eventually become a naturalized citizen. Though he was never officially aligned with the New Critics, Leavis shared much of their philosophy. Like the New Critics, Leavis had a vested interest in pedagogy, specifically, the canonization of English literature. His analyses were often provocative and decisive, but nonetheless, consistent. Leavis was a steadfast proponent of works displaying "seriousness," and this factors into how he reads and reacts to *The Waste Land*. Leavis' respected opinions had much to do with the poem's eventual inclusion in the "high modernist" canon.

Leavis begins his 1933 essay, simply titled “*The Waste Land*,” by making a claim to the poem’s significance to literary history. As compared to the poetry that came before it, *The Waste Land* shows “a rich disorganization” (89). Leavis further comments that “[t]he seeming disjointedness is intimately related to the erudition that has annoyed so many readers and to the wealth of literary borrowings and allusions” (89). These words of introduction are hardly laudatory, but, in the end, Leavis does not take issue with the poem’s disorganization and disjointedness because he sees these elements as a cursory reflection of the context from which the poem originated. Leavis comments on the current state of modernity as one in which

the traditions and cultures have mingled, and the historical imagination makes the past contemporary; no one tradition can digest so great a variety of materials, and the result is a breakdown of forms and the irrevocable loss of that sense of absoluteness which seems necessary to a robust culture. (90)

In other words, Leavis marks *The Waste Land*’s moment in history as being significant precisely for its ahistoricism. He finds it very clear that the poem is a reflection of—and on—a changed world; a world in which innocence has been lost, skepticism triumphs over mystery, and mankind has lost a fundamental part of its spirit. By comparing the world of *The Waste Land* to the historical past, Leavis begins his method of outlining contrasting elements in the poem.

As Leavis continues to work toward his textual analysis, he reads *The Waste Land* in nostalgic terms. It is clear that Leavis sees the modern world in a negative light. When Eliot was writing the bulk of *The Waste Land* in 1921, England was still grappling with

the tremendous devastation wrought by the First World War, but the harrowing effects of the Great Depression's crashing global markets likely motivated Leavis' remorseful feelings toward modernization when he wrote this essay in 1933. Hunger, anger, and dissolution were part of the urban landscape, and in "consideration of our present plight," Leavis blames "the incessant rapid change that characterizes the Machine Age" (90). This assessment leads Leavis to assert that Eliot had recognized "a breach of continuity and the uprooting of life. This last metaphor," Leavis notes, "has a peculiar aptness, for what we are witnessing today is the final uprooting of the immemorial ways of life, of life rooted in the soil" (90). When speaking of roots, Leavis' are undoubtedly conservative. Leavis sees the "waste land" as an urban environment, ironically juxtaposed with "an anthropological theme" from pre-urban cultures (90). The motifs of vegetation cults, fertility rites, and the belief in magic that inspired them, represent "a harmony of human culture with the natural environment, and express an extreme sense of the unity of life," but in *The Waste Land* they bring "no quickening to the human spirit. Sex here is sterile, breeding not life and fulfillment, but disgust, accidia, and unanswerable questions" (91). Leavis ends his introductory statements by blaming science, over-consciousness, and the reduction of beliefs, religions, and morals to anthropology, for the plight of his times.

Leavis' conservative bias has no doubt affected his critical legacy. His commentary on *The Waste Land* is full of vitriol toward modernity, and in this instance it somewhat over-shadows the literary analysis to follow. Once Leavis begins assessing *The Waste Land* and the form it takes, the conservative bias seen in his commentary becomes less notable, as he restricts himself to the comparatively objective practice of textual analysis. Leavis' focus within the poem is two-fold. The first is to analyze the function of

Tiresias, the character Eliot describes in a footnote as the “most important personage in the poem” (480). The second focus is Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*. In regards to the former, Leavis finds that Eliot’s Tiresias illustrates “plainly enough what the poem is: an effort to focus an inclusive consciousness” (92). This facet of *The Waste Land* makes Eliot’s formation of the poem difficult, if not contradictory, for he attempts a poem that at once includes historical consciousnesses from all periods of humanity, yet he hopes to unite them in one character. It would seem, “A poem that contains all myths,” writes Leavis, “cannot construct itself upon one” (92). To manage this contradiction, Eliot invokes Weston’s book, which “provides a background of reference that makes possible something in the nature of a musical organization” (92), one in which each character strikes a tone, that, in tandem, creates a harmonious chord. From here, Leavis’ criticism traces how the various characters sync together to create Eliot’s “music.”

Leavis cites Madame Sosostris’ Tarot card reading scene as the most elucidative of this musicality. To extend the metaphor, the Tarot cards of Section I are the root notes of Eliot’s various chords; their subsequent reconfigurations produce the harmonics. The first figure he finds to work harmoniously is Sosostris’ card “which is blank, [and] is something he carries on his back,/ Which [she is] forbidden to see” (54-55), together with the mysterious Section V figure introduced in this passage:

Who is the third who walks always beside you?

When I count, there are only you and I together

But when I look ahead up the white road

There is always another one walking beside you

Gliding wrapt in a brown mantle, hooded

I do not know whether a man or a woman

—But who is that on the other side of you? (360-366)

Leavis finds the ambiguity expressed in Sosostris' card in Section I, and the unknown figure of Section V, to show an obvious connection. So much so, that "the association establishes itself without any help from Mr. Eliot's note" (93). We see Leavis' directness and provocation when he unequivocally states, "The hooded figure in the passage just quoted is Jesus" (93). Leavis knows this to be true because Jesus has already appeared in the opening stanza to Section V:

After the torchlight red on sweaty faces

After the frosty silence in the gardens

After the agony in stony places

The shouting and the crying

Prison and palace and reverberation

Of thunder of spring over distant mountains

He who was living is now dead

We who were living are now dying

With a little patience. (322-331)

Though Leavis may here be accused of leaning too heavily on his Christian conservatism, he remains committed to a view of *The Waste Land* as containing all historical consciousnesses, and therefore, he insists that this figure "is not only Christ; it is also the Hanged God and all the sacrificed gods:... 'Adonis, Attis, Osiris' and all the others of [James Frazer's] *The Golden Bough*" (94). Here we see Leavis making one of his brash statements, advocating the presence of Christ in the poem, followed by a sort of

retraction, holding that Christ here represents many historical sacrificial godheads.

Unfortunately for Leavis, only the more provocative statement is remembered and therefore passed on as representative of his interpretation.

Leavis' essay largely deals with the first and fifth sections. He limits his discussion to these parts because he feels like they "point out the obvious themes and transitions" (100) in the poem. The first Section sets up the themes that are carried out more fully in the finale. Leavis wants to be clear that these motifs are only introduced in the first section. For instance, if read alone, the first section's lack of water can easily be read as a literal drought that is plaguing the land. When the drought of the first section is compared to that of the fifth, it is clear that the drought should be read allegorically as a spiritual drought, perhaps more so than a literal one. This he thinks is true because "death is inevitable, and the life-giving water thirsted for (and the water out of which all life comes) cannot save" (102). The more important thirst, and the thirst that needs quenched most, nourishes the soul over the body, but this idea is only properly conveyed when both sections are compared. The fact that Eliot's themes are followed through the poem, from beginning to end, illustrates a sort of *idée fixe*. This gives credibility to what Leavis sees as "musical organization." One must be careful to differentiate "musical organization" from something that could be called "prose organization," an organization often more plot-driven. Leavis finds that "the poem is no more 'metaphysical' than it is narrative or dramatic" (97).

Of all the early critics, Leavis probably writes with the most bravado. For the most part, Leavis exalts *The Waste Land*, calling it "a great positive achievement" (103), and he is laudatory of "the touch with which [Eliot] manages his difficult transitions, his

delicate collocations...his tone, in all its subtle variations, exhibits a perfect control” (102). Words of such high esteem certainly elevated Eliot’s poetic career, but Leavis should be remembered more as a critic than a promoter. Though Leavis recognizes Eliot’s achievement in terms of transitions and themes, he is hesitant to do so in terms of organization, which many early critics have been censured for doing. “[*The Waste Land*] has,” writes Leavis,

certain limitations in any case; limitations inherent in the conditions that produced it. Comprehensiveness, in the very nature of the undertaking, must be in some sense at the cost of structure: absence of direction, of organizing principle, in life could hardly be made to subserve the highest kind of organization in art. (103)

Leavis is important to scholarship of *The Waste Land* not only for exposing the poem’s musicality and tonal qualities, but also for discussing the poem’s admittedly chaotic form. In reassessing Leavis’ intervention in the study of *The Waste Land*, it is important not to ignore these statements that qualify his otherwise immodest analysis.

An interesting part of Leavis’ essay that belies standard characterizations of early critics is that Leavis is one of the first to downplay the importance of Eliot’s notes. “The way *The Waste Land* is organized, then,” writes Leavis,

should be obvious without the aid of notes...It is a self-subsistent poem. Indeed, though it would lose if the notes could be suppressed and forgotten, yet the more important criticism might be said to be, not that it depends upon them too much, but rather that without them, and without the support of *From Ritual to Romance*, it would not lose more. (102-3)

Though he does not completely disregard the notes as later critics such as Kenner and Rainey would propose, Leavis thought the poem was credible even without Eliot's comments on the significance of his allusions and references. What is most important about this statement from Leavis is that it is very difficult to accuse him of partaking in Eliot's "Wild goose chase" after Tarot cards and the Grail.

Critics in the years following Leavis' essay would certainly find his essay provocative. The statement that other early critics would take the most issue with was Leavis' claim that *The Waste Land* "exhibits no progression...the thunder brings no rain to revive the Waste Land, and the poem ends where it began" (97). This statement may be seen as contentious because of the Fifth Section's spiritual and divine subject matter perhaps providing a solution to the poem's despair, but the larger implication of Leavis' statement is that here he further absolves any notion of plot. The end of the poem was not the culmination of all things previous, but instead, an extension of the same chaos and disorder that shaped the rest of the poem in its attempt to create "an inclusive human consciousness."

If a scholar of *The Waste Land* were to distinguish one critic as having had the greatest effect on how readers would one day interpret the poem, the critic of choice would likely be Brooks. Brooks would read the poem much differently than Leavis. Though he would similarly refuse to call *The Waste Land* any type of narrative, Brooks certainly disagreed with Leavis in terms of the poem's development and progression. Brooks was a contemporary of Eliot's, and in various ways shared similar views on issues, social and literary. He, like Eliot, confirmed his Christian faith throughout his academic life, and he is known as one of the great explicators of Christian mythology

within literature. His legacy remains as a forefather of the New Criticism. Brooks became so popular and renowned for his close readings, that his reputation often preceded him.

His bold claims occasionally obscured the thorough scholarly practices that ran through his analyses. Such is the case in “*The Waste Land: Critique of the Myth*,” his seminal essay on the poem. As a reason for assessing *The Waste Land*, Brooks offers that “There has been little or no attempt to deal with it as a unified whole” (136). This second sentence of his essay is often misread by critics as Brooks declaiming *The Waste Land* to indeed *be* a unified whole. Such a conjecture misses the point that Brooks is only proposing a reading that will treat all five sections of the poem together as opposed to treating its individual parts.⁶ Lawrence Rainey, for instance, misquotes Brooks’ desire by positing that Brooks thought “[the poem] *was* ‘a unified whole’” (*Revisiting* 117, emphasis mine). Brooks’ statement is about the sort of criticism that has been performed on the poem, whereas Rainey turns the statement toward Brooks’ view of the poem itself. The difference is subtle, but this instance of misquotation stands as an example of Rainey’s willingness to misread Brooks.

Brooks makes his plan clear to his reader. He frames his analysis in pedagogical terms that allow for the poem itself to remain separate from his analysis. “I prefer,” writes Brooks,

not to raise...here the question of how important it is for the reader to have
an explicit intellectual account of the various symbols and a logical
account of their relationships. It may well be that such rationalization is no

⁶ F. O. Matthiessen is one of the critics to whom Brooks admits he is indebted, but Matthiessen addresses—with few exceptions—only parts I and V, the beginning and the end. Similarly, F. R. Leavis, as previously mentioned, only closely examines the introductory and concluding sections as well.

more than a scaffolding to be got out of the way before we contemplate the poem itself as a poem” (136).

The rigidity of Brooks’ “scaffolding” metaphor contrasts the fluidity with which he views the poem. The scaffolding that surrounds the poem is only a framework that will help readers of *The Waste Land* try to piece together the amalgamation of materials laid before them. Like the construction of any building, the idiosyncrasies of its architecture are not exposed until the scaffolding is removed, and the building can be seen, unobstructed by the accoutrements of labor. As Brooks continues to outline his methodology, he cites his focus on Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance*; this line of analysis will be his scaffolding. Similar readings—such as Leavis’—of *The Waste Land* were common among early critics, and Brooks is right to point out that Eliot himself suggests such a reading.

It was mentioned earlier that Rainey criticized Brooks for his dependence on the notes. Rainey is right to bring up that Eliot spoke of the notes possibly misleading critics in 1956, but unfortunately, Rainey omits a quotation by Eliot in a letter to Cleanth Brooks that would suggest he did not always feel as though an analysis featuring “Tarot cards and the Holy Grail” was “the wrong kind of interest.” Brooks did not publish Eliot’s letter until his 1989 essay, “*The Waste Land: A Prophetic Document*,” which Rainey seems to either ignore or dismiss. In his letter, Eliot responds to Brooks’ essay positively, writing:

[“Critique of the Myth”] seems to me on the whole excellent. I think that this kind of analysis is perfectly justified so long as it does not profess to be a reconstruction of the author’s method of writing. Reading your essay

made me feel, for instance, that I had been much more ingenious than I had been aware of, because the conscious problems with which one is concerned in the actual writing are more those of a quasi musical nature, the arrangement of metric and pattern, than of a conscious exposition of ideas. (99-100)

Even in 1989, Brooks was hesitant to bring up the letter from Eliot. In his previous essays, Brooks thought it might be irresponsible to use Eliot's praise because it would have been "a not altogether legitimate or dignified way to promote [his] point of view about the poem" (100). Furthermore, Brooks always held the belief that the poet is not necessarily the best reader of his/her poetry. My inclusion of Eliot's letter to Brooks is not necessarily meant to endorse Eliot's notes to *The Waste Land*, but the belief that Eliot wrote the notes as a consequence only of technological publishing factors should be held in check. Obviously, much more was at stake for Eliot. Initially, Eliot felt like they were elucidative, and readings that focused on them should not be dismissed simply because Eliot downplayed them in 1956.

Brooks ends the preamble to his essay with a discussion of good and evil from a moral standpoint. In doing so, Brooks relates his discussion to Eliot's essay published in 1921, the year before *The Waste Land*, entitled, "The Lesson of Baudelaire." Brooks quotes Eliot, who posits, "So far as we are human, what we do must be either evil or good; so far as we do evil or good, we are human" (138). It is through an understanding of good and evil that one can understand the death-in-life motif of the poem, explained chiastically by Brooks as, "Life devoid of meaning is death; sacrifice, even the sacrificial death, may be life-giving, an awakening to life" (137). Effectively, Brooks posits that

“the waste land” is a world where mankind has lost knowledge of good and evil, which is the requisite understanding to completing our human ontology. Even if man performs an evil act, he nonetheless affirms his existence. “The fact that men have lost the knowledge of good and evil,” writes Brooks, “keeps them from being alive, and is the justification for viewing the modern waste land as a realm in which the inhabitants do not even exist” (138). Here, Brooks imagines the physical waste land of the poem as an allegorical realm where its inhabitants have their own psychology, culture, and unique (a)phenomenological responses to their experiences. In reading this allegory, Brooks sets up his essay as an analysis of contradictions within the poem.

The greatest contradiction outlined by Brooks is between history and the allegorical “waste land.” *The Waste Land* is shown to be a foil held up against history; it is the jarring displacement of an elliptical tradition dating as far back as primordial fertility rites.⁷ This upsetting of tradition shows that to say *The Waste Land* is an arid place where there “is no water but only rock” (l. 331) is tantamount to saying it is a spiritual waste land. As the souls of the people have died, so to has the vegetation. It is true that Brooks reads *The Waste Land* in spiritual terms, but one should be hesitant to accuse him of representing a specifically Christian point of view in his essay. In fact, Brooks aligns himself with Frazer and Weston who conflate Christian belief with the mythology of ancient cultures.

⁷ James Frazer’s anthropological study, *The Golden Bough* (1890), explains that the sacred, sacrificial king, through a supposed act of magic, was reincarnated in the spring in the form of healthy crops. This sacrificial king enacts the same pattern of death and re-birth for salvation, as Christ does according to Christian belief. Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual to Romance* makes a similar argument by tracing Christian beliefs back to Arthurian legend. Eliot cites Frazer and Weston in the notes to *The Waste Land*.

Once Brooks delineates the claims he will be making, he moves into what will be his greatest addition to scholarship of *The Waste Land*: a comprehensive, section by section analysis of the poem. He begins his reading of Section I, “The Burial of the Dead,” by focusing on Eliot’s Biblical allusions, especially those from Ezekiel and Ecclesiastes. Though Eliot alludes to only one verse from each of these books of the Bible, Brooks opens his reading to the books *in toto* and comments on their subject matter being largely about the spread of secularization. Brooks is often criticized for making such arguments that emphasize Christian theology, but here he may be right to do so. In Chapter 37 of Ezekiel, the prophet has a vision of a valley of dry bones. When Ezekiel prophesied to the bones, “there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone” (37, vii). These bones reappear in Section III of *The Waste Land* with “The rattle of the bones” (186), and “bones cast in a little low dry garret,/ Rattled by the Rat’s foot only, year to year” (194-195). In *The Waste Land* there is no prophet, no voice of God to breathe life into bones, and the only evidence of life is the scurrying of vermin. In Section I, these bones are relevant because, as Brooks points out, the prophet “contemplates ‘the burial of the dead’” (140). Brooks sees the Bible as a major influence for Eliot in writing *The Waste Land*, but his analysis goes far beyond Biblical allusions. The bulk of Brooks’ work centers on the fortune telling scene with Madame Sosostris. The figures of the drowned Phoenician Sailor, the one-eyed merchant, and the Hangman all appear on Sosostris’ Tarot cards in Section I, but Brooks traces their progression, claiming they ideologically reappear as different figures throughout the text.

The first instance of a Tarot card figure transmuting into another personage occurs in Section III, “The Fire Sermon.” In this section of the poem, Mr. Eugenides,

the Smyrna merchant, appears as Sosostri's "one-eyed merchant." According to Weston's book, the merchants who traveled far and wide were tasked with disseminating the mysteries of the Grail legend, and thereby creating a cult who sought ever-lasting life. These merchants were a proud group of solicitors, respected in Arthurian legends for their eclectic knowledge. The fact that Sosostri's card depicts the merchant as having only one eye likely refers to the merchant being shown in profile. Eugenides marks one of Eliot's contrasts between *The Waste Land* and a bygone era, for instead of the dignified merchant shown on the Tarot card, Brooks infers that Eugenides has literally lost an eye. He is unshaven and battered. Instead of extending an invitation into a grail cult, Eugenides would rather the protagonist accompany him to the Metropole, a hotel in Brighton, England, described in a footnote as "a locale for homosexual liaisons" (*The Waste Land* pg. 480). "The homosexuality," writes Brooks, "is 'secret' and now a 'cult' but a very different cult from that which Mr. Eugenides ought to represent. The end of the new cult is not life but, ironically, sterility" (154). Brooks seems correct in determining Eugenides to be a dissolute modernization of the Tarot card figure. His examination of contrasts between the historically revered Syrian merchants and the dissipated Eugenides gives credence to the conjecture that Eliot was indeed adhering to some sort of strategy when writing the poem. The strategy reveals the same anti-secularist reasoning promoted by Brooks.

Brooks finishes his tracing of symbols and figures in *The Waste Land* with thorough considerations of Sosostri's "drowned Phoenician Sailor" and "the Hanged Man," recurring respectively in Sections IV and V. It is readily apparent that Phlebas the Phoenician, the subject of "Death by Water," is a recapitulation of the drowned sailor, but

his concerns with “profit and loss” (314), also align him with the one-eyed merchant. Similarly, the “crowds of people, walking round in a ring” (56) and “The Hanged Man” (55) described by Madame Sosostriis, are a part of the “hooded hordes swarming” (369) in Section V. Eliot’s note speaks of his self-described goal to show that “the merchant...melts into the Phoenician Sailor, and the latter is not wholly distinct from Ferdinand Prince of Naples” (158). Eliot’s description of the figures in his poem actually turns away from a fractured reading of *The Waste Land* toward one that is more amoebic in form. The possibility of figures “melting” into one another is also the form of *The Waste Land* described by Brooks as “the obverse of irony” (169), or, “a sense of revelation out of material apparently accidentally thrown together...for the method, like that of irony, is indirect, though the effect is positive rather than negative” (168-169). The positivity of Eliot’s method results in the accumulation of general themes in which the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts. Brooks describes it thus:

With the characters as with the other symbols, the surface relationships may be accidental and apparently trivial and they may be made either ironically or through random association or in hallucination, but in the total context of the poem the deeper relationships are revealed. The effect is a sense of the oneness of experience, and of the unity of all periods, and with this, a sense that the general theme of the poem is true. But the theme has not been imposed—it has been revealed. (169)

Brooks’ conclusion again qualifies what he describes as “unity.” The poem is not described as a unified whole that may be misconstrued as a sort of narrative or even as a succinct idea capable of synopsis. Unity instead is described in much the same fluid

manner that Eliot implies with his “melting” figures, as a unification of history, consciousness, and experience.

Finally, it should be noted that Brooks’ “Critique of the Myth” remains understated in its claims favoring the design and methodology of *The Waste Land*. The conclusion of his close reading of Section V is accompanied by the following caveat: “The foregoing account of *The Waste Land* is, of course, not to be substituted for the poem itself. Moreover, it certainly is not to be considered as representing *the method by which the poem was composed*” (165). In this way, Brooks maneuvers away from a conversation about design and method. His goal is simply to illuminate figures, themes, and motifs across the entirety of the poem. Every statement Brooks makes describing Eliot as “a strategist trying to win acceptance from a hostile audience” is tempered by a statement such as, “The poet himself is audience as well as speaker; we state the problem more exactly if we state it in terms of the poet’s integrity rather than in terms of strategy” (171). For every statement that seems to hint at a notion of “the plan” there is also a recognition of the poem’s dependence upon paradoxes, double-truths, and false positives that undermine and obfuscate any attempts at distinguishing a clear methodology of Eliot’s.

Perhaps the most telling statement of Brooks’ hesitancy is the final sentence of his essay in which he recognizes that “[the poem’s] statement of beliefs emerges *through* confusion and cynicism—not in spite of them” (172). This statement, in many ways, predicts the same conclusions that recent critics have drawn based on their findings from the letters and the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*. The impressive thing is that Brooks’ concluding remarks addressing confusion and cynicism manifest from his

reading of the text, without the aid of extra-textual documents. In considering Brooks with a method tantamount to his own—closely reading his essay in its entirety—it can be shown that his writings have been misconstrued based on characterizations of the New Critics. If we absolve the notion of “New Critic” and all of its ideological trappings, reading “Critique of the Myth” removed from the recently politicized context of the historicists, there frankly is less controversy in what Brooks writes than what critics such as Lawrence Rainey have led us to believe.

Frank Kermode’s Radical Analysis

Having considered among the earliest and most recent critics of *The Waste Land*, I will now turn to a critic who does not fall neatly into either era. As mentioned above, the facsimile edition of *The Waste Land*, and Eliot’s letters, both published several years after his death, have heavily influenced recent critics. Earlier critics made their claims based on the text with less intimate knowledge of Eliot’s biography or of the manner of the poem’s composition. In avoiding the search for novelty in interpretation or investigation, Frank Kermode’s 1965 essay, “A Babylonish Dialect,” represents a unique perspective in regards to *The Waste Land* criticism. Kermode represents a middle ground theoretically. He is neither historicist nor New Critic, and therefore he is less involved with the ideological implications of the various movements.

The event that inspires Kermode’s essay is the death of the poet earlier that year. In 1965, Eliot’s poetry did not garner the same attention as it did for the three-odd decades that preceded it, or even as it does today, but Kermode reminds his readers of the importance of Eliot’s “insistence on making it new, on treating every attempt as a wholly new start” (227). True, Eliot was not the only artist with such an ethos, but he may have

been most successful in maintaining the idea. Kermode quotes W. H. Auden, fellow poet, and writer of Eliot's obituary, for saying, "Eliot cannot be imitated, only parodied" (227). The implication of such a statement is that Eliot's poetry truly was something the literary world had not yet seen. "The lesson," writes Kermode, "was that the craft of poetry can no longer be a matter of perpetuating dialects and imitating what was well made; it lies in an act of radical analysis, a return to the brute elements, to the matter which may have a potentiality of form; but last year's words will not find it" (228). The beginning of Kermode's essay begins in this manner, as a sort of eulogy recognizing Eliot's achievement, describing why Eliot is still important to readers after his death. It is in considering *The Waste Land's* "radical analysis" of society that Kermode sees the poem making its greatest impact on readers.

As Kermode continues, he distinguishes a fundamental difference between Eliot's poetry and his theory. His poetry, as Kermode acknowledges, shows "those beneficial intuitions of irregularity and chaos, the truth of the foul rag-and-bone shop. Yet we remember him as celebrating order" (229). To Kermode, if one of Eliot's works best typifies his theories, it would have to be *The Waste Land*. As far as Eliot's "objective correlative"⁸ is concerned, "Its propriety is limited to Eliot's own earlier verse, which is deeply personal but made inexplicably so by the arbitrariness of its logical relations, its elaborate remoteness from the personal, and its position within a context which provides a sort of model of an impersonal 'tradition'" (230). The idea behind the objective

⁸ Eliot describes his "objective correlative" as "the only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding... a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked" ("Hamlet & His Problems" 100)

correlative is in explicating emotion via impersonal means, i.e. objects. Kermode finds Eliot's early poetry to be much more adept at achieving this quality than his later poems such as *Four Quartets*, which he describes as "by comparison isolated in [its] eminence, tragic, often crystalline in the presentation of the temporal agony, but personal; and closer sometimes to commentary than to the thing itself" (237). Whereas *Four Quartets* might be seen as the poet's expression of tragedy and agony, *The Waste Land* is the very image of those ideas. Thus, the arbitrariness and illogical patterning of *The Waste Land* make its interpretation more equivocal in comparison to *Four Quartets*. Unlike recent critics who might discount *The Waste Land* for these same qualities, Kermode celebrates them.

One of the paramount arguments Kermode makes is that readers of *The Waste Land* should resist biographical and extra-textual analyses. His reasons for denying such readings have nothing to do with pedagogy, but instead Kermode references the fundamental paradoxes in Eliot's thought. For instance, Eliot famously called himself "A Royalist in Politics" in his 1931 essay, "Thoughts After Lambeth." When he made such a statement, this obviously included all of the trappings of Imperialism that were such a large part of the British monarchy. The fact that Eliot would call himself a Royalist contrasts his other preoccupations like his nostalgia for closed societies,⁹ and his favoring

⁹Eliot discusses the fate of the Melanesians in his "London Letter" regarding Concert Hall performer Marie Lloyd that appears in the November 1922 issue of *The Dial*. In it, he mourns that "the natives of that unfortunate archipelago are dying out principally for the reason that the 'Civilization' forced upon them has deprived them of all interest in life. They are dying from pure boredom. When every theatre has been replaced by 100 cinemas, When every musical instrument has been replaced by 100 gramophones, when every horse has been replaced by 100 cheap motor cars, when electrical ingenuity has made it possible for every child to hear its bed-time stories through a wireless receiver attached to both ears, when applied science has done everything possible with the materials on this earth to make life as interesting as possible, it will not be surprising if

of the isolated life promised by American agrarianism. Furthermore, the “Unreal City” of *The Waste Land*, in large part, is London itself, the seat of the monarchy in England. It is hard to see the “Unreal City” as anything but the reality of Royalist failure, the conditions produced by the crown spread too far. The mixing of cultures, ideas, sexual practices, and economies has turned the Waste Land into a sort of modern day Babylon, degenerate and doomed. “When we think of the great poem,” reflects Kenner, “we think of it as an image of imperial catastrophe, of the disaster and not the pattern. For that pattern suggests a commitment, a religion...but the poem is a great poem because it will not force us to follow” (233). If *The Waste Land* does have an ideology or an order, it cannot be concretely relayed because the poet constantly blocks what Kermode deems “the retreat to commitment” (233). That is to say, Eliot denies the establishment of any sort of dogmatic interpretation of his poem, or any interpretation that concretizes a conception of the author.

To give Eliot’s blocking of commitment a nomenclature, Kermode turns to what French philosopher Simone Weil called *decreation*. Kermode gives a summary of the idea thus:

decreation is not a change from the created to nothingness, but from the created to the uncreated...the form in which Simone Weil expresses it is rather obscure, though she is quite clear that ‘destruction’ is a ‘blameworthy substitute for decreation.’ The latter depends upon renunciation, considered as a creative act like that of God.” (234)

the population of the entire civilized world rapidly follows the fate of the Melanesians” (662-3).

In *The Waste Land*, Eliot does not play God; rather he disappears from his creation. If Eliot did not hide himself from the poem, it would be difficult to see anything but him when reading the poem. Kermode recognizes that there are certain disadvantages to a poem of decreation. No longer can the poet defend his poetry against the criticism considering it. Kermode remarks that in a way, “Eliot pushed his objective correlative out into the neutral air...he expected it, liberated from his own fictions, to be caught up in the fictions of others” (235). *The Waste Land* was, for Eliot, a text of which he lost control. Because of the poem’s lack of commentary, the commentaries provided by others could never be satisfactory to Eliot’s own ideology. This fundamental disagreement between the poet’s ideology and the ideologies assigned to him by his critics, is the reason Kermode gives for Eliot’s ever-changing feelings about *The Waste Land*, seen in Eliot’s renunciation of his notes, the disagreement that he gave “voice to the disillusionment of an era,”¹⁰ and his eventual dismissal of the poem as “rhythmical grumbling.”¹¹

Kermode concludes his essay by offering the way he thinks readers should approach the poem. He wants to be clear in giving the power of analysis fully to the reader. This seems like a reasonable response to a poem that typifies an objective correlative. Since the subjectivity of the poem is not in the text, it should manifest in the

¹⁰ In his 1931 essay, “Thoughts after Lambeth,” Eliot responded to critics who thought the poem captured “the disillusionment of a generation” by saying that “I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention” (qtd. in Miller, xi).

¹¹ Valerie Eliot includes as an epigraph the late Professor Theodor Spencer quoting Eliot during one of his Harvard lectures as saying, “Various critics have done me the honor to interpret the poem in terms of criticism of the contemporary world, have considered it, indeed, as an important bit of social criticism. To me it was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life; it is just a piece of rhythmical grumbling” (*Facsimile* 1).

beholder, just as Eliot describes. One way to determine this subjectivity is by recognizing, as Kermode claims,

a certain ambiguity in your own response. *The Waste Land*...can strike you in certain moments as an emperor without clothes;...cobbled into a sequence which is always inviting the censure of pretentiousness. It is with your own proper fictive covering that you hide [its] nakedness and make [it] wise. (236)

This type of reading seems to, in a way, fulfill Lawrence Rainey's suggestion to "remain open to the pleasure of amazement and the sense of wonder that a reading of *The Waste Land* inevitably brings" (128). But because Kermode has kept himself outside of the political debate surrounding *The Waste Land*, he is a critic recent scholarship has forgotten. Because he is outside of the dialog Rainey has started, he is marginalized from recent consideration.

Kermode closes his essay with a careful consideration of how *The Waste Land* changed not only poetry as we know it, but what it means to be "modern." The poem stands as one of the first to exhibit decreation, and we have henceforth been changed in how we read and analyze poetry. Much like Aristotle once looked for the impossible but plausible in the best of plot structures, Kermode finds that we, as contemporary readers of poetry, have embraced "a habit of mind that looks for analysis...by controlled unreason" (236). The very features that recent critics use to dismiss the poem are the same elements that Kermode celebrates. "One can think of the poem," writes Kermode, "as a mere arbitrary sequence upon which we have been persuaded to impose an order" (236). The order is there to be found in the text itself, but it will always remain resistant to a

synthesis by the literary collective. Whatever “order” the reader constructs, should be a personal one, as opposed to one that forces commentary and ideology upon new readers.

Conclusion

Having looked back on criticism of *The Waste Land*, we can draw certain conclusions regarding the function and operation of literary analysis. One important lesson is that criticism does not necessarily work progressively. Research in literature should not be seen as an accumulative act, unlike an academic model like that of the hard sciences. Certain ideas are lost or forgotten, trends dictate trajectories, and before a new claim can be advanced, it is necessary to look back on that which it wishes to refute. Critics struggle in this industry to prove their relevance, so instead of enforcing the work of their forbears, exercises in destructive criticism are much more common. In such a market, the economy of books and the economy of ideas become one and the same. The critics given credit for “changing the course of scholarship” are often the critics who sell the most volumes of their work. Once ideas shift into a market setting, their importance becomes more difficult to decipher. The key is to temper our understanding of any reading that claims to be “revolutionary,” or that supposedly creates a “rupture.” When addressing a thoroughly dissected poem such as *The Waste Land*, it becomes exceedingly difficult to create scholarship that completely undermines or invalidates what has already been written. The enormous scope of criticism surrounding a poem such as *The Waste Land* entails that some criticism will be forgotten, if not willfully ignored. There may be new methodologies for approaching a poem; new information may surface, but it seems as though few of the extrapolations that are made by extra-textual investigations have not already been found, at least in some small way, inside the text.

When reading Lawrence Rainey, it may seem as though his greatest addition to scholarship of *The Waste Land* is held in the extensive tables and charts exactly describing Eliot's production of the poem. While these data are themselves an important response to earlier research that Rainey shows to be incorrect, the timeline itself contains no essential argument. The fact that Eliot wrote a certain part of *The Waste Land* on a certain typewriter in a certain city had few, if any implications, on the New Critics' reception of poem. But if Rainey wants to sell his book, he needs to fit his tables and charts somehow into a larger discussion about literature. "Dates by themselves," writes Rainey, "are inert information, raw data; they must be integrated into the connecting tissue of analysis and argument" (*Revisiting* x). This seems like more of a practical statement offered to justify his claims than it is a bona fide assessment of the operations of literary criticism. Unfortunately, Rainey's "connecting tissue" becomes interwoven with political ideology, and as a result, he overstates his claims. Instead of adding his contextual reading to *The Waste Land*'s already thorough textual readings, he must "read [Eliot's] poem in a key that differs sharply." Ironically, if Rainey's "inert information" and "raw data" are the main ideas of his book, then he is guilty of the same charge he brings against Eliot for being too involved in the marketing of his works. We see this marketing in the simple fact that Lawrence Rainey published *The Annotated Waste Land* at the same time as *Revisiting The Waste Land*. The former publication contained the text of the poem, including Rainey's notes, along with Eliot's contemporary prose, and these books were meant as companion pieces. If he sold one copy, he hoped to sell the other. In the preface to *Revisiting The Waste Land*, Rainey mentions *The Annotated Waste Land* and the pitch is rife with the jargon of advertising. Rainey proclaims the companion work

as “only recently republished after more than eighty years; see Lawrence Rainey, ed., *The Annotated ‘Waste Land’*” (*Revisiting* x). Ironically, these books are now shaping new readers’ first impressions of the poem just as the New Critics supposedly did in *The Waste Land*’s early years. Rainey describes his audience as anyone from “scholars of Eliot’s work” (xi) to “a reader who has encountered the poem for the first time only recently” (xi). When Rainey markets his books to such a broad audience, it should come as no surprise that his ideas have taken such a firm hold on scholarship of *The Waste Land*. It will be interesting to see the direction of criticism of *The Waste Land* once new generations of students enter academia having been taught that the text itself is dead. The consequences of such a methodology taking hold in our institutions may be that scholars become less adept at viewing the poem as a point of comparison, something the early reviewers and critics rarely failed to do.

Modern readers of *The Waste Land* will no doubt have certain complaints against Leavis and Brooks. Their readings do show a conservative bias. From Leavis’ disavowal of science and fear of “over-consciousness,” to Brooks’ descriptions of Christian allusions, these critics certainly adhere to an ideology that regrets modernity and secularization. Even Kermode, who should not be accused of holding a conservative bias, still compares *The Waste Land* to a modern day Babylon. Truly, when reading *The Waste Land*, it is hard to not conclude that it, too, regrets modernity. Perhaps when Leavis spoke of the poem “exhibit[ing] no progression,” he could have just as easily said the poem exhibits nothing progressive. Even in today’s comparatively liberal academic climate, early critics of *The Waste Land* continue to offer valuable analyses that should not be forgotten or dismissed for political reasons.

A final way to differentiate early and recent criticism without focusing on their ideology is to consider their perspective. Early critics, due to their proximity to the age that produced the poem, committed to imagining the landscape that makes up *The Waste Land*. They saw it as a figuration of a world readily comparable to their own. This ability to reflect on the poem's real world implications produces a broad sense of what it means to them to be "modern." Over the years, discussion of *The Waste Land*'s zeitgeist has drifted into personal psychology that no longer speaks to the age. It is easy to write about that bygone era from the relative comfort of the twenty-first century, easy to forget about the very real fear of fascism, the denaturing effects of Futurism, and the pervading threat of a Second World War. For Eliot and his early readers, these were more than simple preoccupations, more than chapters in history books; they were part of the fabric of everyday life. Seen in this light, the poem itself is the true analytic vehicle. The poem is a critique of the world, and this is what gives the poem its power. Though we may have lost a proximal perspective, we should not lose our imagination. This is what Cleanth Brooks described when he compelled his readers "to contemplate the poem itself as a poem" and what Frank Kermode implied in calling *The Waste Land* "radical analysis." We, as readers, should remain committed to a reading that considers the poem in a holistic sense, fearing not to use our evaluative skills to breathe life back into the allegory.

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